



sound judgment

The Motor City's Music Guide

age

Miriam Gideon

of

Mary Jane Leach

obscurity

Mary Howe — "Stars," "Sand," "Spring Pastoral," "Castellana," etc. (CRI) ★★★
 Miriam Gideon — "Sonnets from Shakespeare," "Nocturnes" etc. (CRI) ★★★
 Mary Jane Leach — "Ariadne's Lament" (New World) ★★★

Mary Howe (1882-1964) and Miriam Gideon (1906-96) wrote compelling music but remained underrated, largely because they toiled in a sexist age. Today things are better. Most concertgoers are unaware of the inventive Mary Jane Leach (born 1949), not because she's a woman, but because American culture — despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary — still considers contemporary music a form of sonic castor oil.

You've come a long way, baby?
 Howe, a longtime resident of Washington, D.C., studied at the Peabody Conservatory (and later with Nadia Boulanger) and helped found both the Association of American Women Composers and the National Symphony. She wrote prolifically in a tonal, melodic style that took much of its inspiration from the 19th Century.

The CRI disc is split between short orchestral pieces originally released on LP and more expansive chamber works recorded in the '50s by a radio station. Harmonic and melodic contours reminiscent of Ravel pop up in both the "Suite for String Quartet and Piano" and "Three Pieces After Emily Dickinson" for string quartet, the latter offering a few extra perks of dissonance.

Gideon's more prickly scores betray her studies with Roger Sessions. She was an expert at setting text to music, and the eight pieces reissued here mesh individual voices with chamber ensembles or orchestra. Gideon's freely atonal music leaps surprisingly between octaves. Turn-on-a-dime dynamics, textural shifts and a muscular lyricism distinguish her music, especially the powerful "Sonnets from Shakespeare."

Vermont-born, Leach also specializes in vocal music. Most of these recent works are scored for chorus, often a female choir. Leach channels a deep affection for Renaissance music and early polyphony through a modern, post-minimalism aesthetic.

Inspired by the Ariadne myth, "O Magna Vasti Creta" for women's choir and string quartet undulates slowly, not glacially, with piquant half-steps and pedal tones flowering into music of uncommon sonic purity and beauty. To her credit, Leach offers a spiritual recharge without the banalities of the new mysticism of Arvo Part or Henryk Gorecki. Leach may be emotionally cool but she's never placid or disengaged. 2538, 2539 and 2540

By Mark Stryker, Free Press music critic

Listeners should know about these female composers